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ABSTRACT

Assessment is authentic when it occurs continually in the context of the classroom environment and reflects actual learning experiences. This paper discusses some of the political issues involved in the use of statewide performance assessment. The paper first defines portfolios, performance events, and other forms of alternative assessment. It then briefly outlines the educational challenges of a diverse society, and focuses on two key flash points of conflict between vision and reality: (1) how assessments should be used; and (2) what should be assessed. The paper draws heavily on the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) for examples, but the issues raised are those faced by educators in many places. The KERA put into place a statewide assessment system comprised of portfolios, performance events, and open-ended and multiple-choice tests. The paper offers strategies for keeping the debate about authentic assessment focused and constructive: (1) Openly acknowledge the technical limitations of current assessments systems, including authentic assessment practices; (2) take the time to communicate to and with all stakeholders; (3) take the time to build a solid based of support among stakeholders; (4) treat the opposition with respect; and (5) prepare to fight for your beliefs. (Contains 39 references.) (LMI)

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# UKERA
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# The Politics of Portfolios, Performance Events and Other Authentic Assessments

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## INTRODUCTION

> Whether you like it or not the millions are here, and here they will remain. If you do not lift them up, they will pull you down... Education must not simply teach work - it must teach life. (W. E. B. Dubois, 1903)

One of the few benefits of getting older is the occasional sense of historical perspective that comes from working in education for almost twenty years. We have a strong sense that educators are entering the next phase of a predictable cycle of educational reform. In this case, the initial glow of anticipation is beginning to wear off the promise of alternative assessments and the daunting extent of the challenges educators face is starting to emerge. Our visions are meeting reality and we are learning - once again - that technical issues are easier to address than social or political issues.

We would like to share some of our thoughts about some of the political issues in performance assessment. We start with a strong endorsement of the current move towards more authentic and constructive forms of assessment. We are well-aware of the limitations of traditional forms of assessment (e.g. Neill & Medina, 1989; Johnston, 1991; Winograd, Paris, Bridge, 1991) and of the benefits already accrued from widespread use of portfolios (e.g., Graves, 1983; Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1991; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991), observational checklists (e.g Clay,1985; Harp, 1991; Kemp, 1989; Rhodes & Nathenson-Mejia, 1992), performance events (e.g. Wiggins, 1989) and other forms of alternative assessments. Our intent is to find ways that visions of reform and the political realities of public education can be meshed to the benefit of students.

We start by defining what we mean by portfolios, performance events, and other forms of alternative assessment. Next, we briefly outline the educational challenges of a diverse society. Then we focus on two key flash points of conflict between vision and reality: 1) How assessments should be used; and 2) What should be assessed. We draw heavily on the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) for our examples, but the issues we raise are those faced by educators in many places.

## PORTFOLIOS, PERFORMANCE EVENTS, AND OTHER FORMS OF ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Assessment is authentic when it occurs continually in the context of the classroom environment and it reflects actual learning experiences. We define authentic assessment as evaluation that occurs continually in the context of a meaningful learning environment and reflects actual and worthwhile learning experiences that can be documented through observation, anecdotal records, journals, logs, actual work samples, conferences, portfolios, writing, discussions, experiments, presentations, exhibits, projects, and other methods. Authentic assessments may include individual as well as group tasks. Emphasis is placed on self-reflection, understanding and growth rather than responses based only on recall of isolated facts.

The intent of authentic assessments is to involve learners in tasks that require them to apply knowledge faced in real world experiences, rather than a test given after and disconnected from instruction.

## THE EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES OF A DIVERSE SOCIETY

We want to start by placing the issues of assessment in a larger educational context. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned: "Our nation is at risk". Educators and other concerned citizens hoped that their call for massive educational reform would bring positive change for all students. Ten years later, we seem to have focused more on tightening standards for educational outcomes rather than taking steps to ensure that every child has a reasonable chance of attaining them. Schools need to create winners, not pick winners.

One of the most important issues facing educators today is the continued low academic achievement of many Black, Hispanic, Native American, inner-city, and poor rural students. It is no secret that the schools have not served these youth well. Standardized test scores continually reflect these disparities while data on suspensions, expulsions, retentions, dropout rates indicate that far too many of these youngsters are being "distanced" from mainstream America. Unless more resources are put into the resolution of this crisis, the U.S.

will remain a "Nation at Risk".

Consider the following facts:

- The drop-out rate among minority students in urban schools has reached as high as 50% (O'Neil, 1990).
- 80% of America's prisoners are high school dropouts, and each prisoner costs over $20,000 to maintain for a year (Hodgkinson, 1988).
- During the last decade, the proportion of Black men attending college suffered the largest decline of all racial and gender groups (American Council on Education/Education Commission of the States, 1988).
- Hispanics are less likely than other racial or ethnic groups in this country to complete high school (National Council of La Raza, 1991).
- Differences in achievement between Anglo and minority students can be substantially explained by unequal access to high-quality assessment, curriculum and instruction (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 1992).
- The largest increase in poverty is among Blacks without a college education (National Urban League, 1989).
- Disproportionate percentages of poor and minority youngsters (principally Black and Hispanic) are placed in tracks for low-ability or non-college-bound students ( NCES, 1985; Kuykendall, 1992).
- Poor and minority students are consistently under represented in programs for the gifted and talented (College Board, 1985).
- Black and Hispanic youth are suspended from schools at a rate three times that of their Anglo counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 1986).

Predictions indicate that, by the year 2020, the U.S. population will be 30% Black and Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). Several states will have "minority" populations that are, in fact, the majority. And by the year 2000, 42% of all public school students will be living in poverty (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1986). When one considers that the increasing diversity of our schools' populations can have serious implications for our individual and

collective survival, the consequences of not effectively educating these students must be addressed. And while these statistics may be alarming to some, the saddest reality is that too many of these students are still receiving high school diplomas without the requisite motivation to lead enriching and productive lives. Even with high school diploma in hand, many students still lack the hope or the chance to achieve lifelong success. Without a doubt, educators can be pivotal players in diverse society's quest to create a well-educated labor force and a more secure and prosperous citizenry.

## THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT: SEPARATING WINNERS FROM LOSERS OR HELPING ALL CHILDREN LEARN?

How do the issues of assessment reform fit into this picture of the changing demographics of schooling? One of the key distinctions between the philosophies underlying alternative forms of assessment and traditional forms of assessment is that the former are aimed at providing students with systematic opportunities to gain ownership of and insight about their own learning, while the latter are aimed at ranking students in comparison to each other (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Winograd, Paris, & Bridge 1991). Another key distinction is that alternative assessments are intended to provide teachers with a rich basis for making professional judgments about instruction while more traditional forms of assessment were intended to provide educators with an "objective" basis for sorting students and sanctioning teachers and schools on the basis of their relative achievement.

The differences between these philosophies of assessment derive from a more basic differences in deep assumptions about the nature of children in schools and people in society. Current reform efforts in general expressly take the position that all students can learn and at dramatically higher levels. In stark contrast, the tacit assumption underlying current approaches to education is that low levels of achievement and high rates of failure, dropouts, and pushouts somehow reflect real differences amongst children. We are not suggesting that

anyone celebrates this tacit view, rather it is taken as a grim and pragmatic reflection of just the way the world is.

A recent study by Roberts and Kay (1993) examined reactions to the assertion that all children can learn at high levels by a group of 92 Kentucky students, teachers, administrators, parents, school board members, and owners and managers of small businesses. Roberts and Kay presented a number of interpretations and findings, but the two most relevant for our purposes include:

1. The present structure of schools and of society profoundly affects what Kentuckians consider possible for children.
    - Many of the study's participants believe that the stratification in the schools reflects God-given differences in ability and mirrors the stratification in society. One administrator said, "What's a high level for someone may not be for somebody else. I mean, there have got to be people who work at McDonald's, and if everybody is a genius, who is going to be the genius who is going to want to work at McDonald's?"
    - The less "schooled" children are, the more participants believe in their capacity. Most of the participants had the highest expectations of children from birth to the end of the primary school.
    - Teachers and students were more likely than the other participants to disagree with the assertion that all children can learn at high levels.
    - Most participants defined learning at high levels in a traditional manner: being quick at gaining knowledge that will result in high test scores and good grades.
2. Most participants view assigning blame for children's and schools' failures as important responsibilities; the question of blame dominates conversations about schooling, forcing out attention to needed changes.
    - Teachers, parents, citizens and business people blame parents for most of the failures at school.

- When participants consider their own school failures, they do not blame their own parents. Instead, they blame individual educators.
- Students place some blame on parents, but more blame students themselves.

The reactions of the participants in the Roberts and & Kay study provide some insight into the reasons that underlie people's low expectations of children. One reason is that current perceptions about schools and society are limiting people's vision about what schools and society could be. Our limitations of here and now have become the boundaries of our future. A second reason for low expectations has to do with avoiding responsibility for school failures. Low expectations of children provide the final argument in trying to fix blame. We find it easier to blame the children who are victims of school failure than to grapple with the political and social problems posed by ill-prepared parents, educators, and other adults in the communities who can not or will not face their responsibilities.

In summary, our low expectations for children can be traced to a failure of imagination and a failure of responsibility. Bishop (1993) in an editorial entitled, *If this is all we envision, our children are doomed.*, writes, "Our future is limited by the world that we first create in our own minds. We can never accomplish what we can't first imagine...How can the students become what the citizens of the this state can t imagine as being possible? They can't."

In the politics of assessment, then, the most basic challenge is to help teachers, parents, administrators, legislators, citizens and other adults raise their expectations about children's potential.

One way to help adults who are influential in the lives of children raise their expectations is by acknowledging the current reality that students do differ in what they achieve for a variety of indisputable reasons including differences in ability. Simply chanting the reform mantra "All children can learn" will do nothing to change the situation and, in fact, will convince pragmatic educators that reformers are too idealistic to be taken seriously.

We believe that the assertion "all children can learn and at dramatically higher levels" is shorthand for rethinking the ways in which we think about children and the way we think

about schooling. All children can learn means that all children including those who are poor, minority, rural, or urban have the potential to grow intellectually, emotionally, and aesthetically. All children can learn means envisioning a society which gathers strength from and celebrates a diversity of talents and capacities. Different children may grow in different ways - this one a mathematician, that one an architect, a third a dancer - but all children have potential.

All children can learn means that schools must find ways to support and nurture each child's potential and avoid poisoning any child or groups of children with the venom of low expectations. The problem of low expectations is hardly a new issue (e.g., Oakes, 1985), but it is still one we have yet to successfully address.

In terms of assessment, all children can learn means that any changes in the assessment system must be embedded in a larger context of systemic change. The issues of systemic reform are complex; the one we will consider here has to do with opportunity to learn.

If we really want an assessment system that provides richer information about students' potential for learning, if we really want an assessment system that demands higher standards of achievement, then we must be willing to provide students with rich opportunities to learn (e.g. Pullin, 1994). The National Council on Educational Standards and Testing (NCEST, 1992, p. 6) argues, "particularly for children, who have historically experienced less success in schools, such as the poor, ethnic minorities and students with disabilities, schools should insure the opportunity to learn as a critical condition for valid and fair use of assessment results."

Kentucky is a positive example of a state's efforts towards enriching students' opportunities to learn. KERA calls for improving the state's entire educational system and fundamental changes are taking place in the structure and curriculum of preschool and primary programs, middle-schools, and high schools; in the establishment of family resource/youth service centers, extended school services, and regional service centers; the implementation of school-based decision making; initiatives in educational technology; efforts in professional development; and increases in basic funding formulas. These kinds of efforts are what it will

take to make the promise of "all children can learn" come true. We are beginning to see evidence that the resources we put into schools do make a difference in terms of children's achievement (e.g., Hedges, Laine, & Greenwald, 1994; The Kentucky Institute for Education Reform,1993).

The extent to which we can raise adults' expectations about children and to which we can embed assessment in a larger systemic reform effort are likely to be the extent to which we can change assessment from a mechanism used to sort and rank students to a process for empowering students and teachers. Darling-Hammond (1994, p. 7) writes, "A fundamental question is whether assessment systems will support better teaching and transform schooling for traditional underserved students or whether they will merely reify existing inequalities."

In our view, the most immediate danger is that we will solve the conceptual and technical problems of alternative assessment but continue to use the new assessments in old ways - to rank and sort children, to reinforce curriculum tracking, and to focus on issues of accountability rather than on issues of learning and teaching. If this happens, efforts at reform will fade, and a generation of reformers will become cynical and disillusioned. More importantly, however, another generation of students will venture forth into the world damaged by our lack of imagination and our unwillingness to face our responsibilities.

## WHAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED: BASIC SKILLS OR WHAT REALLY COUNTS IN LIFE?

A second key distinction between the philosophies underlying alternative assessments and more traditional assessment lies in what is to be assessed. Extensive discussions about what children should know and be able to do, debates about standards and outcomes, and what really counts in school and in life have provided a powerful context for determining what is to be assessed. In contrast, most traditional forms of assessment have limited their focus to basic skills in academic areas.

In Kentucky, for example, the traditional tests like the CTBS or the KEST (Kentucky Essential Skills Test) used multiple choice formats and focused on low-level basic skills. With

the passage of the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA), however the goals of schools changed dramatically. A task force of Kentucky citizens, business people, and educators developed Six Learning Goals which identified what students should know and be able to do. They found that Kentuckians wanted all students to be able to:

1. use basic communication and math skills for purposes and situations they encounter in life;
2. apply core concepts and principles from mathematics, the sciences, arts and humanities, social studies, practical living studies and vocational studies for purposes and situations they encounter in life;
3. become self-sufficient individuals;
4. become responsible members of a family, work group, or community;
5. think and solve problems across the variety of situations they encounter in life;
6. connect and integrate the knowledge they have gained in school into their own lives.

The 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act also put into place a statewide assessment system (KIRIS -Kentucky Instructional Results Information System) comprised of portfolios, performance events, open-ended and multiple-choice tests that would, over a six year span, evaluate students' progress towards achieving the Six Learning Goals.

It is now spring of 1994 and students and educators across the state have had several years' experience with KIRIS. Reactions are varied but one can point to both progress and problems (e.g. Guskey, 1994; The Kentucky Institute for Education Reform,1993). Up to now, the majority of concerns have focused on technical, economic, and logistical issues.

The convening of the 1993-1994 Kentucky Legislature, however, provided the opportunity for the political issues involved in the assessments to surface. A concerted effort by more conservative religious groups challenged the appropriateness of the state to teach and test what they considered values, attitudes, and other non-academic areas (Schaver, 1994). Kentucky is experiencing what educators in Colorado, Pennsylvania and other states have experienced - the political debate about the goals of schooling in general and, by implication, assessment in particular (e.g. Davis & Felknor, 1994; Harp, 1993; Pliska & Mcquaide, 1994).

The debate about what is appropriate to teach and to test has a long and complex history. The participants in this debate represent an astonishingly wide range of perspectives. Some of these points of view are, in our opinion, more legitimate than others, but all deserve to be heard. Pullin (1994, p. 47) refers to this debate as "The Opportunity to Choose What to Learn," and she makes the point that "privacy issues have not traditionally been the focus in curriculum and assessment debates." The philosophy and practices of authentic assessment, however, ensure that educators will have to face privacy, religious, and social issues if they are serious about reforming assessment.

In Kentucky, for example, some more extreme groups have criticized the Six Learning Goals and other student standards for favoring values over basic skills, and promoting homosexuality, and witchcraft. Other groups are concerned that teaching students to work in groups will encourage socialism or that the widespread use of educational technology will make it easier to invade students privacy (Lexington Herald-Leader, May 2, 1994).

One of the first casualties of these kinds of attacks is any hope that authentic assessment can be used to help all children learn. While it may be tempting to respond with disbelief and derision to some of the more outlandish claims, we think it is more important to develop a repertoire of strategies for keeping the debate about authentic assessment focused and constructive. Here are the beginnings of our list drawn from our own experiences and from the growing literature (e.g., Pliska & McQuaide, 1994) on the political issues of reform:

1. Openly acknowledge the technical limitations of current assessment systems including authentic assessment practices. For example, even though goals like cooperative learning, metacognition, problem-solving, and critical thinking may be of value, our ability to assess these dimensions of learning is primitive at best. How these dimensions are assessed and what use is made of the assessment results must be seen as tentative. Educational reformers can do themselves severe damage if they react to parents, teachers, and other concerned citizens with arrogance and technical jargon.
2. Take the time to communicate to and with all stake holders. Many of the concerns voiced by people are based on miscommunication and misinformation.

3. Take the time to build a solid base of support among parents, legislators, the media, the business community, and other influential citizens. Education reform in general and assessment reform specifically can not be mandated from the top- down. Darling-Hammond (1994) refers to the importance of "top-down support for bottom-up reform and we strongly agree."
4. Treat the opposition with respect. Many concerns flare into larger more emotional-charged arguments because schools exclude or ignore certain groups of people.
5. Prepare to stand up and fight for your beliefs. Despite the best efforts at clear communication and building consensus, there will be fundamental conflicts between groups. Public education requires active involvement.

The debates about what students should know and be able to do as a result of their schooling are complex but so is the world our children will face. We strongly favor the kinds of learning goals identified by Kentucky's reformers as well as those identified by reformers in other states and on the national scene. If assessment continues to be defined as the testing of basic skills rather than as a constructive process to better enable students and teachers to focus on what matters in life, then we will have sentenced a significant percentage of our children to educational mediocrity.

## SUMMARY

Many of us in education are excited about the potential inherent in current reform movements. But is is essential that we temper our enthusiasm with an appreciation of the realities of the issues that we face. Solving the technical issues in education, or literacy, or assessment, is always easier than solving the political and social issues. Our ability to make progress depends on our ability to face our responsibilities and to imagine a better world for our children.

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